
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Historical Notes on Pennsylvania's Public School System : With Suggestions as to needed changes



By NATHAN C. SCHAEFFER

State Supt. of Public Instruction

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Recently a writer representing the Carnegie Pension Foundation cast the following aspersion upon our school system: "Pennsylvania has never come into a conception of education from the standpoint of the whole people; as a consequence, its public school system is still in a rudimentary state."

Fortunately not all the people of New England are in such dense ignorance of what has been achieved educationally in the State of Pennsylvania. In the National Magazine for August, A. E. Winship, the well-known editor of the National Journal of Education, and who, though living in New England, has risen above the Bostonian view of the universe, calls attention by way of reply to a series of facts which should be better known to many who live in the Keystone State. This Boston editor says:

"Evidently the Pension Foundation does not know that Pennsylvania led the world, led Massachusetts even, in the great public school awakening of the 30s; that before Horace Mann gave Massachusetts its great public school leadership, Governor Wolf, of Pennsylvania, wrote the greatest of educational messages and Thaddens Stevens, at Harrisburg, made a greater educational speech for the public schools than ever was made, even by Horace Mann.

"This Pension Foundation seems not to know that Pennsylvania's poorest paid country school teachers get much better salaries than thousands of teachers in New England; that the scholarship standards and professional training in several of the State normal schools of Pennsylvania are fully equal to the best in Massachusetts, and that in the poorest they are higher than in any one of eight normal schools in New England; that normal school principals in Pennsylvania get 60 per cent. higher salaries than in Massachusetts; that the State of Pennsylvania gives more money to her common schools than all of the New England States combined; that politics has played no part in State school administration for 16 years. But why emphasize further this stupendous ignorance of the Pension Foundation regarding the public schools of Pennsylvania, when the ignorance is not confined to that State."

CREDIT NOT DUE TO HORACE MANN.

The educational awakening in our State did not come about, as many have supposed, through the influence of Horace Mann. It antedates his splendid work in Massachusetts. The establishment of a system of common schools was advocated in the messages of Governor Schulze and Governor Wolf. The latter staked his re-election upon his advocacy of schools free to all, and although he was defeated when it came to his re-election in 1834, the school law which, through his efforts, has been enacted with but a single dissenting voice in the Assembly, or lower house, was saved from repeal through the eloquence of Thaddeus Stevens. The two were bitter political enemies, and yet they buried their differences and worked together to give the State a school system which has now been in operation for 75 years. Stevens declared that he would follow the leader whose "banner streamed in light," and Governor Wolf, after the vote was taken, sent for Stevens and with tears of gratitude rolling down his cheeks thanked his political opponent for what he had done to give the children of the State a system of common schools.

The system was born on our own soil and grew up in response to our own needs. The original act was drawn by Judge Samuel Breck, whose father moved from Boston to Philadelphia to escape the higher rate of taxation in the former city. The boy was sent to France to be educated. There he joined the Catholic Church, and without doubt carried through life the educational enthusiasm which he received while attending the College of Soreze, in Lower Languedoc.

Judge Breck entered politics, and had himself elected to the State Senate for the sole purpose of giving the State a system of general education. Having accomplished this purpose, he retired from public life and could not be induced to run for office again.

The original act was cumbersome and difficult to administer. Dr. George Smith, a Senator from Delaware County, conceived the idea of making the township the unit of school administration, and it was in 1836, the year the Public Ledger was born, that this change was made in the original school law. Here again writers on education are prone to show their ignorance of our educational history. The author of "The American Rural School" says:

"Massachusetts, which was the first to legalize the district unit, was likewise the first to abolish it. This happened in 1882. New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, New Jersey, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania very soon followed suit, and likewise changed to the town-

ship system. More than 20 other States have laws permitting township organization for school purposes, although they have as yet not exercised this permission to any extent."

TOWNSHIP SYSTEM FOR MORE THAN 70 YEARS.

As a matter of fact, Pennsylvania has had the township system, not since 1882, but for more than 70 years. Since 1836 every township, borough and city has been a school district, and the sub-district system never prevailed except in a comparatively small number of districts called independent districts. The creation of these independent districts is now generally admitted to have been a mistake. It interferes with the development of a rational system of high schools, and imposes unnecessary taxation upon the owners of the less valuable farms. With the exception of these independent districts, Pennsylvania has escaped the evils of the district (often called sub-district) system, under which the schoolhouse with the community sending to it is the unit of school administration. Other states are still struggling to escape these evils, and in some instances have found it impossible to secure what the wisdom of Senator Smith gave us in the 30s.

And yet, the Carnegie Foundation has the temerity to assert that Pennsylvania has never come into a conception of education from the standpoint of the whole people. The only ground for such an assertion is the fact that Philadelphia was exempted from the jurisdiction of the State Superintendent and from other acts of Assembly, and this was due to previous legislation, which was believed to be superior to the common school law, and which may have given rise to the taunt that Philadelphians believe themselves to be made of "finer dust" than are the other people of the Commonwealth.

In the days of Andrew Jackson the surplus in the national treasury was distributed among the states. Pennsylvania's share amounted to more than half a million dollars. Through the influence of Governor Ritner this money was set apart for school purposes, and was mostly used in the erection of school houses. Governor Ritner was a native of Pike township, Berks county, and he certainly did not get his enthusiasm for school from New England. When he was a candidate for Governor, an editor, thinking he would further Mr. Ritner's chances of election, announced that Mr. Ritner was opposed to the common school system, whereupon the latter visited the editor's sanctum and remained until the editor had penned a correction of this misstatement. He was not willing to gain votes upon the pretense that he was opposed to free schools.

COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT MARKED IMPORTANT EPOCH.

The next crisis came when the office of County Superintendent was created. In the earlier days the townships were required to levy twice as much tax as the amount received from the State appropriation. The directors would take oath that this levy had been made according to law, whereupon, as soon as the oath was filed, the Secretary of the Commonwealth, who at that time was ex officio Superintendent of Common Schools, would send out the warrant for the State money, and in some instances as soon as this money was paid the duplicate was recalled from the tax collector and not a cent of local tax for school purposes was collected.

It is known that in one township of Armstrong county the State school money was spent upon the public roads. They must have had apostles of good roads at that time. Of course, this happened, as former Governor Stone used to say, "in the good old days when everybody was honest."

To prevent the misuse of public money in this way the policy was adopted of paying the school appropriation at the end of the year for which it was made, and the office of County Superintendent was created in order that a representative of the school department might visit the schools and see that they were kept in operation according to law. The superintendent affixes his approval to all the reports which the directors are required to make, and it now seldom happens that the school appropriation must be withheld from a district because the directors have knowingly violated any of our school laws.

The creation of so many new offices led to violent opposition to Governor Bigler and contributed to his defeat at the next election. Fortunately his successor, Governor Pollock, was a firm friend of efficient schools. Special legislation was proposed and passed through the House and the Senate abolishing the office in four counties. State Superintendent Hickok was sent for when the bill reached the Governor. He was asked to write out the reasons for a veto. The writing of the veto message was assigned to Andrew Gregg Curtin, then Secretary of the Commonwealth. When it appeared it did not contain one of Mr. Hickok's arguments. It stigmatized the bill as special legislation of the worst sort, and was triumphantly sustained in the legislative branch in which the bill had originated. At Reading a mass meeting was held, at which both Mr. Hickok and Governor Pollock made speeches committing themselves to the continuance of the new office. On their return to Harrisburg the Governor was told that

Mr. Hickok would ruin his administration. Laying his finger between his eyes, as if to distinguish right from wrong, the Governor declared that he would allow every part of his administration to go down in failure rather than see the schools suffer harm from ill-advised legislation. A Governor whose religious scruples prevented him from attending the inauguration ball given in his honor had no hesitation in taking a firm stand for efficient schools.

In some states the office of County Superintendent was created and again abolished. Pennsylvania never took a backward step of that sort. Nor did her Legislature ever commit the mistake of providing for the election of superintendents by popular vote. Wherever this plan has been tried the office has fallen into the hands of politicians. Sometimes men have been selected by vote of the people who could not pronounce a column of words without a mistake. In states afflicted with officials of that sort there always springs up a demand for examinations conducted from the State capital; and the State Superintendent sometimes deteriorates into a mere reader of examination papers. Let any one compare the questions prepared by the average County Superintendent of Pennsylvania with the tests prepared by State boards of education, and he will rejoice over the variety of the questions as well as over the fact that the superintendency has never been a political office in the Keystone State.

POLITICS AND THE SCHOOL DON'T MIX.

Politics and the schools do not mix. Wherever the two are joined together the child loses. That superintendents hold office regardless of the mutations of politics speaks well for those who planned the supervision of our schools. The school population has outgrown the possibilities of efficient supervision in the larger counties, and if the legislators of 1911 shall prove as wise as those of 1854 they will provide for closer supervision by giving assistants to the superintendents, at least in all the larger counties, if not in most of the cities and counties.

The history of the movement for the establishment of State Normal Schools in Pennsylvania is unique. Governor after Governor and Superintendent after Superintendent urged the establishment of special schools for the training of teachers. The colleges had been tried and were found wanting, so far as the preparation of teachers for the common schools was concerned. Finally Mr. Benjamin Bannon, of Pottsville, suggested that the schools for the training of teachers might be established as private schools, and that the graduates might be examined and certificated to teach by State authori-

ties. To Governor Pollock the idea seemed feasible. Thomas H. Burrows was asked to draft an act, which he did on a Sunday. His son relates how on a Sunday evening he was called out of bed to carry the draft of the act to the postoffice. It was sent to State Superintendent Hickok with this message: "If you get this enacted into law it will be your best winter's work, as it has been my best Sunday's work for many a year." In a letter now in possession of the writer Mr. Hickok describes how the act was passed.

In the closing days of the session of 1857 (according to Mr. Hickok), he and Mr. Curtin went to the House, feeling that if nothing adverse happened the bill might become a law, although Henry D. Foster, the leader of the opposite party, which had a majority, was known to be against the measure. Mr. Curtin, who was the prince of good story tellers, called Mr. Foster to one side and entertained him whilst Mr. Hickok did work on the floor. The reading clerk, Uncle Jake Ziegler, was in the secret, and the bill passed while Mr. Curtin held Mr. Foster spellbound by anecdotes.

Ultimately the efficiency of a school system depends upon the teachers who are employed. During the Civil War the young men went to the army and the schools began to pass rapidly into the hands of women teachers. Economic reasons have emphasized this tendency. As a consequence the State normal schools, which were originally attended by more young men than young women, are rapidly becoming ladies' seminaries, in the sense that they are attended only by young women. The young men have not deserted the State normal schools entirely, as has happened in Massachusetts and other States, but the strong tendency on the part of young men to quit the schools for the sake of entering more lucrative vocations is viewed with alarm by those who believe that there is a time in the life of every boy and every girl when he or she should come at school under the influence of a masculine mind.

HIGHER SALARIES CAN CHECK THE TENDENCY.

Higher salaries can alone check this tendency. A constant change in women teachers must be expected, because attractive and well educated young women will be asked to exchange the school room for the queenship of a home. The State can well afford to pay for the tuition of the women who ultimately help to make homes for the next generation. The nation needs good mothers quite as much as it needs good teachers. Perhaps we should be very thankful that pupils are developing into teachers and that the teachers are constantly becoming patrons, thus keeping the school and the home in the closest possible sympathy and co-operation.

The last 20 years have witnessed much legislation never dreamed of by our forefathers in their most sanguine moments. Provision has been made for free text books and supplies, for the establishment of township high schools, for the issue of employment certificates by the school authorities, for the enforcement of compulsory attendance at school, and for the recognition of college diplomas in the issue of life licenses to successful teachers.

A gentleman whose business takes him over the entire State recently declared that the two greatest things which had been done in recent years for the education of our children were the lengthening of the school term and the fixing of a minimum salary for teachers. He further expressed the conviction that inasmuch as the minimum term had been gradually lengthened from four to five months, then from five to six months, and later from six to seven months, another forward step should be taken by fixing the minimum term at eight months. In connection with the higher minimum salary paid to teachers of skill and scholarship this lengthening of the term would enable the most remote rural districts to secure the services of graduates from our State normal schools. The average school term is now nearly eight and a half months, but this is due to the longer terms of school in the cities, boroughs and suburban sections of the State. The hope of the granger that the boys can be kept on the farm will never be realized so long as the teaching of agriculture is made impossible by short terms and poorly-trained teachers. Families will move into sections where the children can enjoy satisfactory school facilities.

LOW ASSESSMENTS ARE RESPONSIBLE.

The chief reason why certain rural districts cannot get enough money to have good schools is found in the low assessment of real estate. At this point the directors are helpless against the assessors. The law requires property to be assessed at its full value, and this is the case in counties like Chester, where the millage is very low. Wherever the millage is very high one may generally expect that the assessor has not weighed very seriously his oath to assess property according to law. The inequalities in the assessments about which one hears so much whenever taxation for municipal and school purposes is discussed should not be blamed upon those who administer our school system. The trouble lies elsewhere, and the people still look for a leader who shall frame a law calculated to make every citizen and every corporation pay a just share of tax for the support of

the Government and the education of the people. In too many minds reform means legislation that will make the other fellow pay the taxes.

That Pennsylvania has awakened to the conception of education from the standpoint of the whole people is evident from the annual school appropriations. In the last two decades remarkable progress has been made in liberal appropriations to the public schools. From 1834 to 1890 the total paid out of the State Treasury for common schools reached the magnificent sum of \$28,000,000, but this amount pales into insignificance when compared with the \$120,000,000 appropriated for school purposes since that date. And yet persons are often misled in making comparisons. New Jersey, with a school population equal to one-third of ours, has set apart fixed revenues for elementary and high schools amounting to about \$7,000,000 annually, while her appropriations at each legislative session seem small in comparison with ours. After all has been said in praise of our liberality, we must not hide from our eyes the need of more money if the schools are to solve the many problems which are shied at the teachers by the advocates of progress and reform. To expect the schools without more money to solve all the problems in agricultural, industrial and commercial education now claiming public attention, is to commit over again the sin of Pharaoh, who expected the children of Israel to make bricks without straw. We need better teaching in the lower schools, better facilities in our high schools and an equipment that will enable the pupils to study the things which lie at the foundation of modern civilization.

WHERE THE MONEY MUST COME FROM.

Good schools cost money, and the money must come partly from the State and partly from local taxation.

Our school system is based upon popular government. Laws must be enacted to protect the children against the parsimony and the short-sightedness of local school boards. The schools can never be made better than the people want them to be, nor will the schools be permitted to lag far behind the demands of public opinion. Those who would take away all power from the local boards and vest it in some central authority like a State Board of Education, thereby unconsciously admit that in their thinking popular government has proved a failure. No surer method of destroying popular interest in the schools can be devised than that which takes the control from the people and vests in them only the privilege of paying the taxes.

The world moves and the schools are apt to be too conservative. Courses of study must be modified and improved so as to adapt them to the changing needs of a progressive civilization. In arithmetic, for instance, it is useless to waste the time and brain power of children upon problems which never occur in practical life, or which were needed in business transactions now antiquated by several hundred years. It is admitted that for purposes of mental discipline, algebra and geometry are far more valuable than number work. A revolution is taking place not merely in the teaching of arithmetic, but also in the methods of teaching language, history and the sciences. In medicine the practitioner who has not kept in touch with modern discoveries ever since he took his degree, is no longer fit to practice medicine. In education progress has been equally marked. Many a teacher whose work at one time elicited praise, finds himself out of touch with what is now demanded in the public schools, simply because he has failed to keep abreast of the times.

There was a time when any one could step from the gutter into a law school. All this has been changed, and the study of law now requires at least a high school training. There was a time when the young man who could not get a teacher's certificate went to the medical college, and at the end of two courses of lectures returned home with a diploma authorizing him to practice medicine. Today our law requires a preliminary education covering four years of high school work, or its equivalent, and a subsequent course of four years of professional study before the graduate of the medical school can be admitted to the State examination for license. There are at least twenty-five learned vocations, the doors to which are closed to the youth who quits school without getting the equivalent of a high school education.

ADDITIONAL LEGISLATION WILL SOON BE NEEDED.

The time is undoubtedly at hand when our school system needs additional legislation. It would be folly to cast aside provisions and regulations which were framed in answer to our own needs, simply because these differ from similar laws in other states.

On the other hand, it would be the acme of stupidity to assume that our system has reached perfection, and that new legislation is unnecessary because the people can have as good schools as they are willing to pay for. In Pennsylvania, as under the Old Testament dispensation, the law has constantly served as a schoolmaster in the creation of public sentiment and in the improvement of the schools.

But in all the legislation that may be attempted, the interests of the children should be made the first consideration. Surely no man in his senses would wish to enact a school code so filled with defects and contradictions as to give the rising generation educational facilities inferior to those which our school system now offers in every section of the Commonwealth.



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